

Local lockdown lunacy: Putting Birmingham into lockdown would be ridiculous

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Birmingham is a city which has done significantly better than other cities in the U.K. when it comes to Covid19. In the biggest city outside London, a place of 1.2 Million people, people have responded and behaved appropriately throughout. The citizens of Birmingham should be congratulated, not warned. Other big cities and population areas have fared far worse than Birmingham. But local authority figures in Birmingham are ridiculously putting the city on standby, it would appear, for a local lockdown.

We know that lockdowns cause non-Covid19 death too. And where the disease itself is not causing death, a lockdown will cause deaths in Birmingham, not prevent them.

I have reported the detail of the [U.K.'s neighbourhoods' experience of Covid-19](#) for the last 5 months and presented research and analysis here at the [Centre for Brexit Studies](#). Looking at the same statistics, as of yesterday, according to the government's own testing figures, 87 of Birmingham's 132 neighbourhoods (called MSOAs by the government) did not record a single tested positive case of Covid-19 in the last week. So 716,000 Brummies live in a neighbourhood where there were no positive tests in the last week.

Fifty-three of the neighbourhoods (418,000 people) have not recorded a single case in the last 4 weeks. Forty-six neighbourhoods (371,000 people) have not recorded a single case in the last 8 weeks.

Birmingham cannot, as a city, be in any way regarded as a Covid-19 hotspot. And rounding up from specific neighbourhoods where testing is now showing an increase and applying that to Birmingham as a whole simply won't wash.

The most reliable figures in a pandemic are, sadly, deaths, not tests. The Office for National Statistics reports the sad figures every week, and they're much higher than the official NHS statistics. Even there, though, the most up-to-date Birmingham figures this Tuesday from the ONS reports that it is 79th in the list of England and Wales local authorities in terms of deaths per 100,000 people since this all started; ONS reports that Birmingham has reported **less than one Covid-19 related death per 100,000 in the last 4 weeks of reporting**, making it 144th in the list of England and Wales authorities. During June 80% of neighbourhoods did not record a single Covid-19 related death.

In the last week of reporting the ONS reports 1 actual covid-19 related death in Birmingham.

Even the U.K.'s patchy testing system shows the rates of infection are relatively low in Birmingham, currently about 30 cases per 100,000 per week. Birmingham is 67th across Britain's local authorities in the so-called infection rate since mid-March. Hospital admissions for Covid19 are negligible in the city according to local doctors.

Local Newspapers in Birmingham have been doing their job, and the [Birmingham Mail/Birmingham Live](#) was quick out of the blocks with great reporting by Jane Haynes immediately, asking local medical opinion what their opinions were. Not surprisingly, it seems to be news to them that there's a problem. But the tests have shown a spike, say the local authority types. Not across Birmingham they haven't.

When you are dealing with such low (and unreliable) numbers small changes might seem to become spikes. So the rate of infection per 100,000 in Birmingham went up from 16 per 100,000 people two weeks ago to 22 per 100,000 last week. That's seems a jump of almost 40%. But it's actually just 6

more people in 100,000. These are micro-numbers, and talking about them in terms of spikes just won't do. It is certainly not enough to spark policy change.

In any event, we should also have learned by now, surely, that the testing systems and regimes in the U.K. are in total chaos. They are all over the place. And policy responses based on it will be chaos too, if we trust it, especially locally. And unless you place the number of testing episodes next to the number of positive cases the figures are literally meaningless. You have to report number of positives per number of tests and then positive tests per 100,000 people. If we have these figures for Birmingham they must be reported. [We need honest, open figures out of Birmingham.](#)

So-called 'Spikes' are occurring here, there, and everywhere up and down the country because new testing regimes are causing them either with false positives, picking up residual infections or (usually more likely) suddenly increased testing in specific areas.

Covid-19 related deaths are the only real reliable figure throughout this pandemic. Where a local area is showing a significant increase in deaths, there is a problem that needs national intervention. You can't let local officers and politicians who by definition look at very local contexts to over-react. Which is what they have started to do.

And where severe curtailing of civil liberty is involved, the decision has to be made by national government. It can't be shuffled onto local politicians and officials. They do not have a significant enough democratic mandate for that.

What you can't have is local lockdown panic without a wider context. Otherwise you'll get ridiculous decisions to lockdown completely unrelated to the actual risk.

Hyper-local intervention in very local areas of concern is a much better future option. Shutting down regions and cities will be ineffective, and has already been seen to be so.

91% of England (that's 51 million people) live in neighbourhoods where there hasn't been a recorded Covid-19 case in the last 4 weeks.

If the so-called spikes in places like Birmingham lead to reported Covid-19 hospital admissions or reported Covid-19 deaths, then there is cause for alarm. So we need to know if this is the case. But the reality is that increased and more widespread testing is leading, oddly enough, to finding more cases. This has not broadly led to increases in Covid-19 related deaths and hospital admissions in other so-called hotspots. Something else is at play. Until we get our testing, and track and tracing system, into proper, reliable shape we should not be basing policy on it.

If Birmingham is intended to go into lockdown there are areas across the country which are far worse off than Brum on the terms suggested. The 10 constituencies across North Wales, for example are, in terms of tests, far worse off both recently and since mid-march, for example.

But 'Just in case' lockdowns are simply not an acceptable response to dodgy data. And lockdowns cause deaths.

Disclaimer: The views expressed within this blog are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Centre for Brexit Studies and Birmingham City University.